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Writing in engineering: pronoun usage in written assignments by Chinese, British and Greek students

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Writing in Engineering:

Pronoun Usage in Written Assignments by Chinese, British and Greek Students

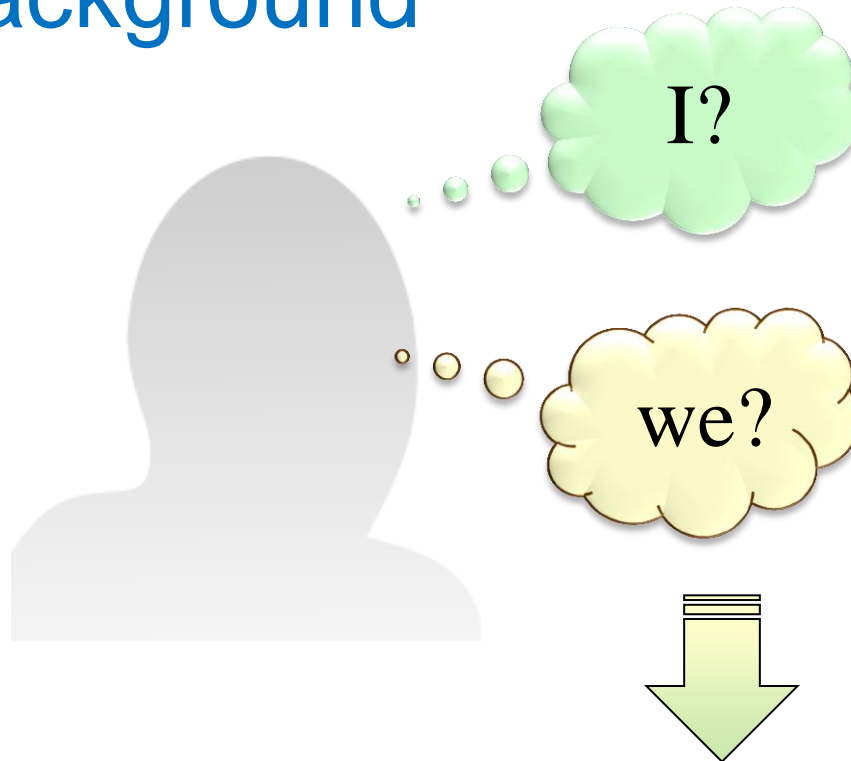
Dr. Maria Fernandez-Parra & Dr. Maria Leedham

BAAL 2013



Background

First person pronouns are a **highly visible** aspect of a writer's identity construction (Hyland 2002).



L1 English students ↔ L2 English students

'overuse' of 1st person pronouns

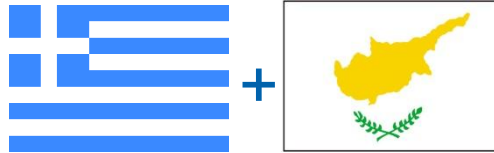
detracts from
EFFECTIVENESS
(e.g. Lee & Chen 2009)



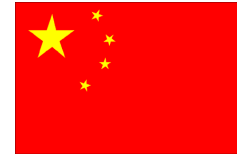
Aim



L1 English



L1 Greek



L1 Chinese

L2 English

To compare the use of / and we in academic writing in the UK of students from three different cultural and educational backgrounds



Literature review



	HESA 2012
	<p>International groups registered at UK universities in 2010-2011:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•67,325 Chinese students•11,630 Greek students

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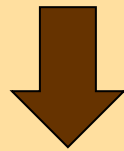


Literature review



Academic writing

- No longer viewed as impersonal due to the presence of 1st person pronouns



- High degree of authorial involvement in writing (e.g. Luzón 2009:193)





Literature review



L1 Chinese students

- 1st person plural highly used by Chinese students (Lee and Chen 2009)
- 1st person plural more used in professional research articles than by Chinese students. (Hyland 2002)
- Chinese culture is a collectivist one (Loi & Sweetnam Evans 2010)



Literature review



L1 English students

Employ 1st person pronouns significantly more frequently than:

- Chinese L1 students (Lee & Chen 2009)
- Greek L1 students (Koutsantoni 2005)
- French, Dutch, Swedish and Finnish L1 students (Petch-Tyson 1998)
- Spanish L1 students (Luzón 2009)



Literature review

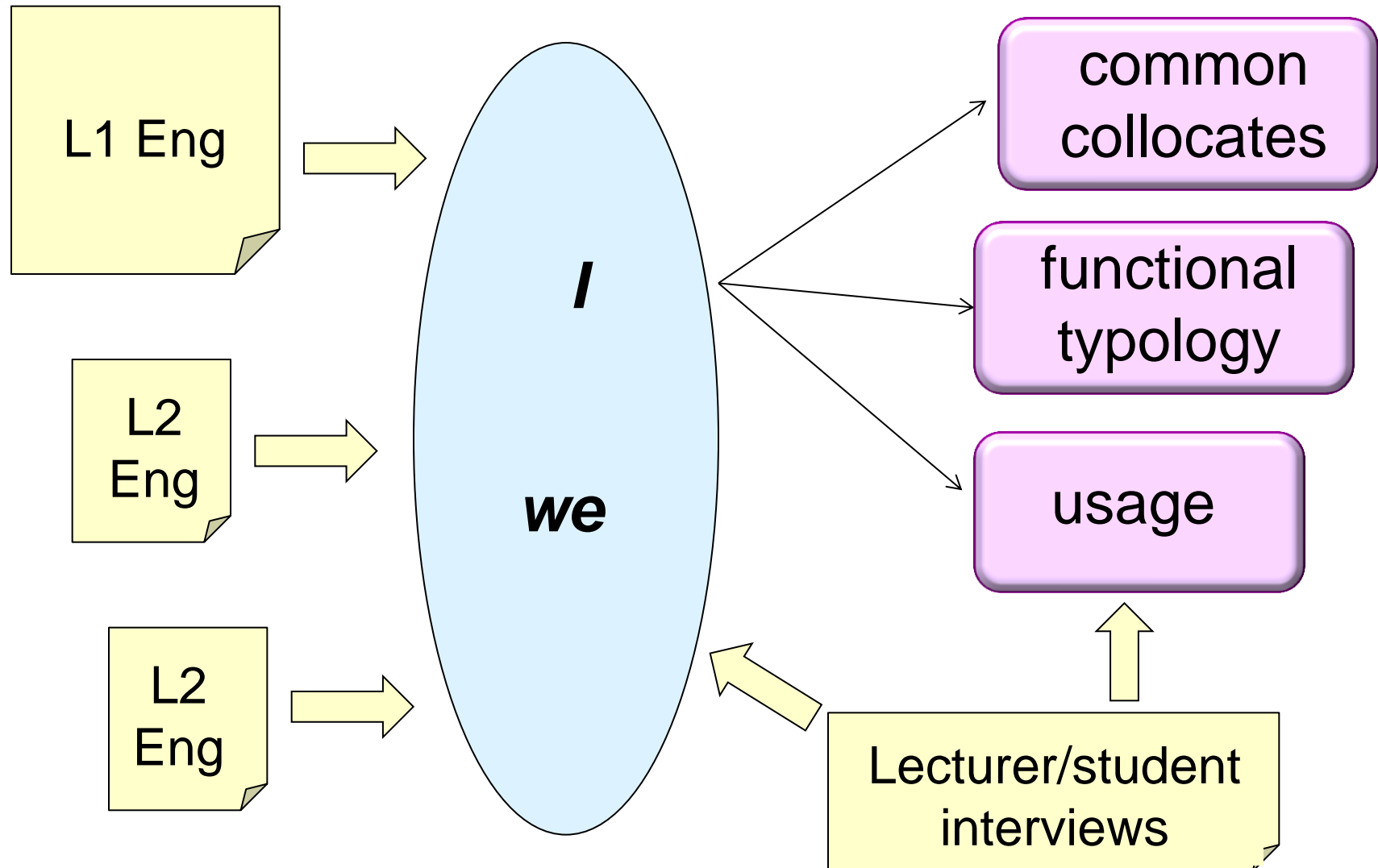


L1 Greek students

- “Students are highly personal in their writing.” (Koutsantoni 2005:123)
- “Most personal attribution in the writing of students is expressed in the 1st person plural.” (Koutsantoni 2005:123)
- “Greek society is a collectivist one” (Koutsantoni 2005: 102)



Method





The BAWE Corpus

British Academic Written English

2004 - 2007

ESRC proj. no.
RES-000-23-0800

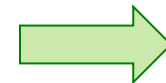
6,506,995 words
2,761 assignments
1,039 contributors
35 disciplines
13 genre families
4 levels of study



Universities:

- Warwick
- Reading
- Oxford Brookes
- Coventry

L1 English
L1 Chinese
L1 Greek



ML &
MFP
corpus



L1 Chinese
L1 Greek



<http://ota.ahds.ac.uk>



The Data

Corpus Data	English	Chinese	Greek	TOTAL
Words	434,822	143,933	96,667	675,422
Texts	143	50	33	226

60% +

UG +
PG



BAWE



Five UK
universities

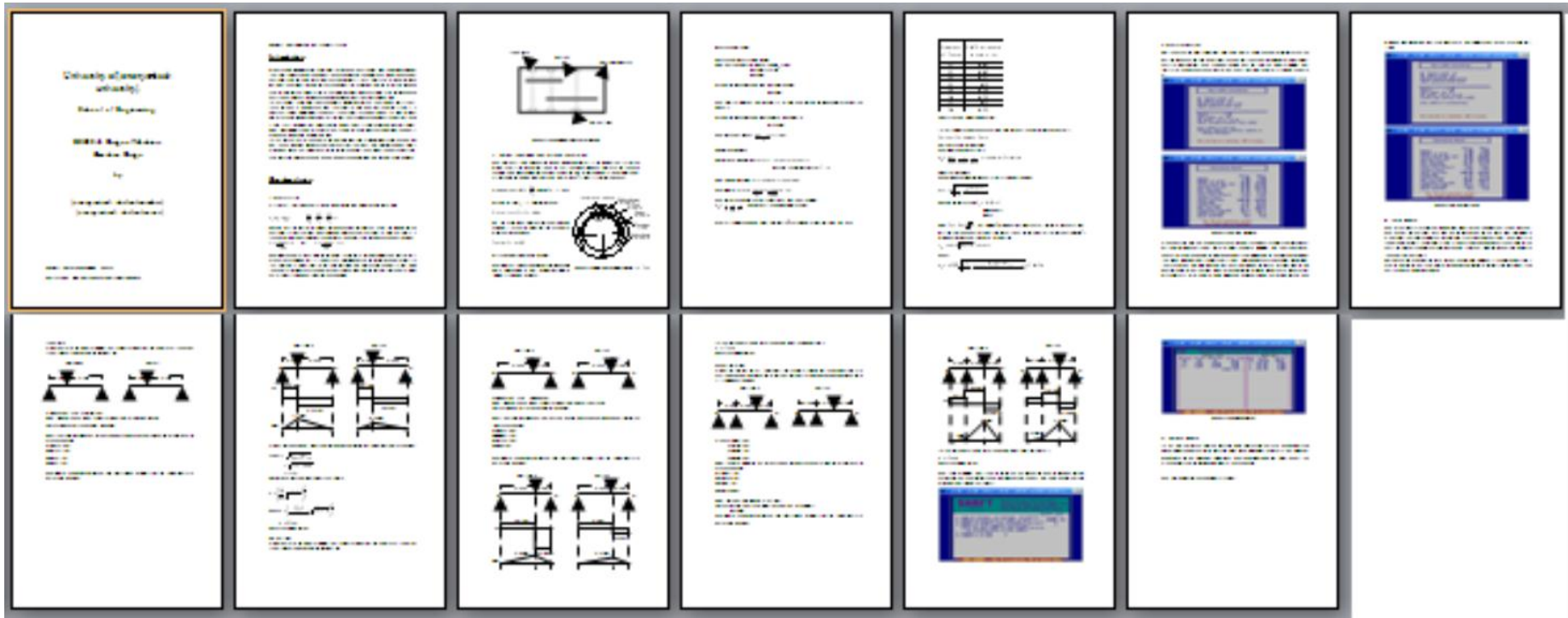
Individual
student authors



Interviews

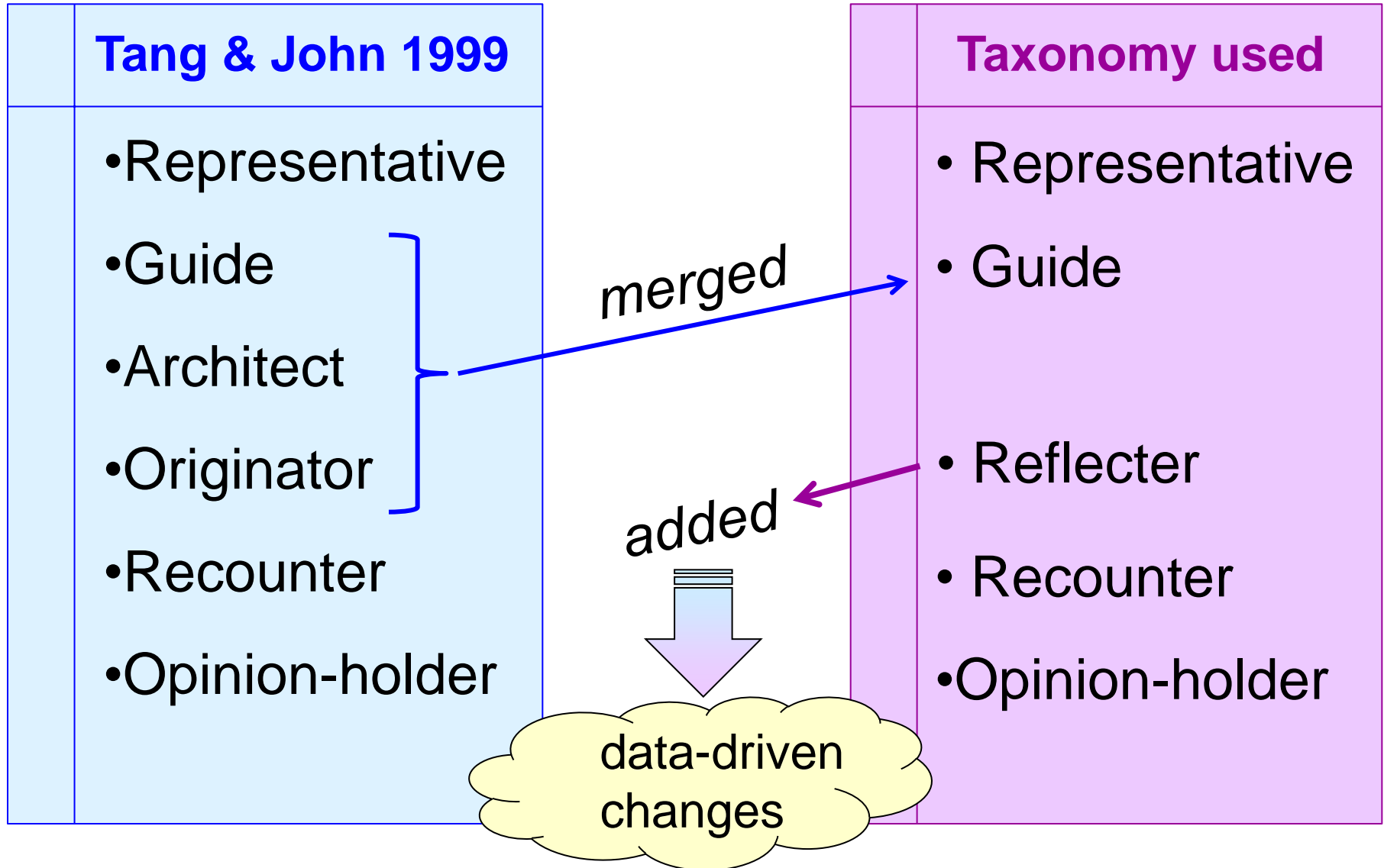


Engineering assignments





Taxonomy of 1st person pronouns





Taxonomy of 1st person pronouns



Adapted from Tang & John 1999

- **Representative**

e.g. *There are still large areas of the bacterium's biology we don't understand.*

- **Guide**

e.g. *In this report I will construct mathematical models to predict the displacement....*

- **Reflector**

e.g. *Had the team taken advantage of this earlier, we may have performed even better.*

- **Recounter** e.g. *Firstly we measured out an area.*

- **Opinion-holder** e.g. *I personally find the use of motivational skills to be...*



Occurrences of / and we

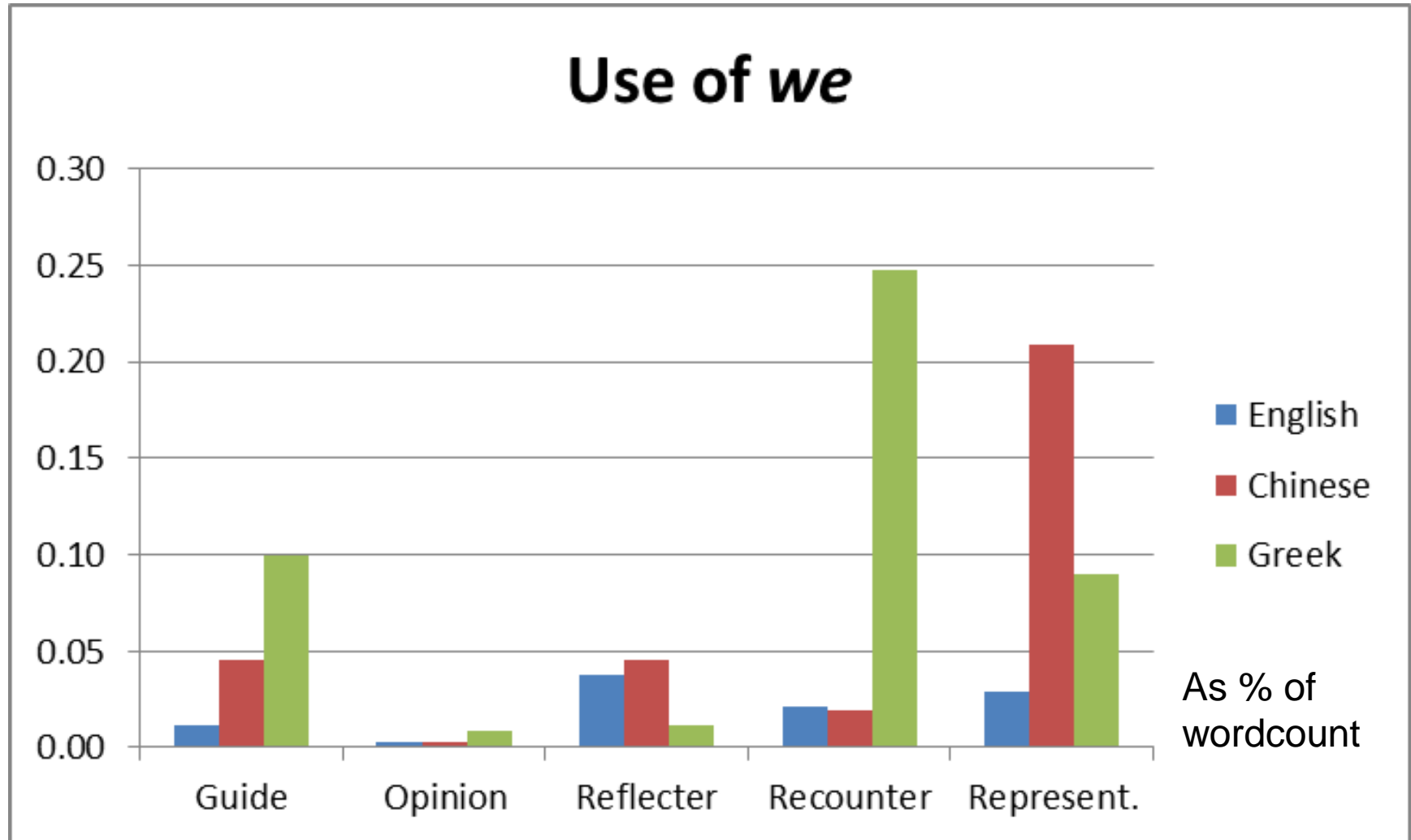


per 10,000 words (raw)

	Eng. Engin.	Chi. Engin.	Greek Engin.
<i>We</i>	10.16 (447)	16.47 (463)	45.62 (441)
<i>/</i>	6.09 (276)	2.92 (30)	5.38 (51)
TOTAL	16.25 (723)	19.39 (493)	50.99 (492)

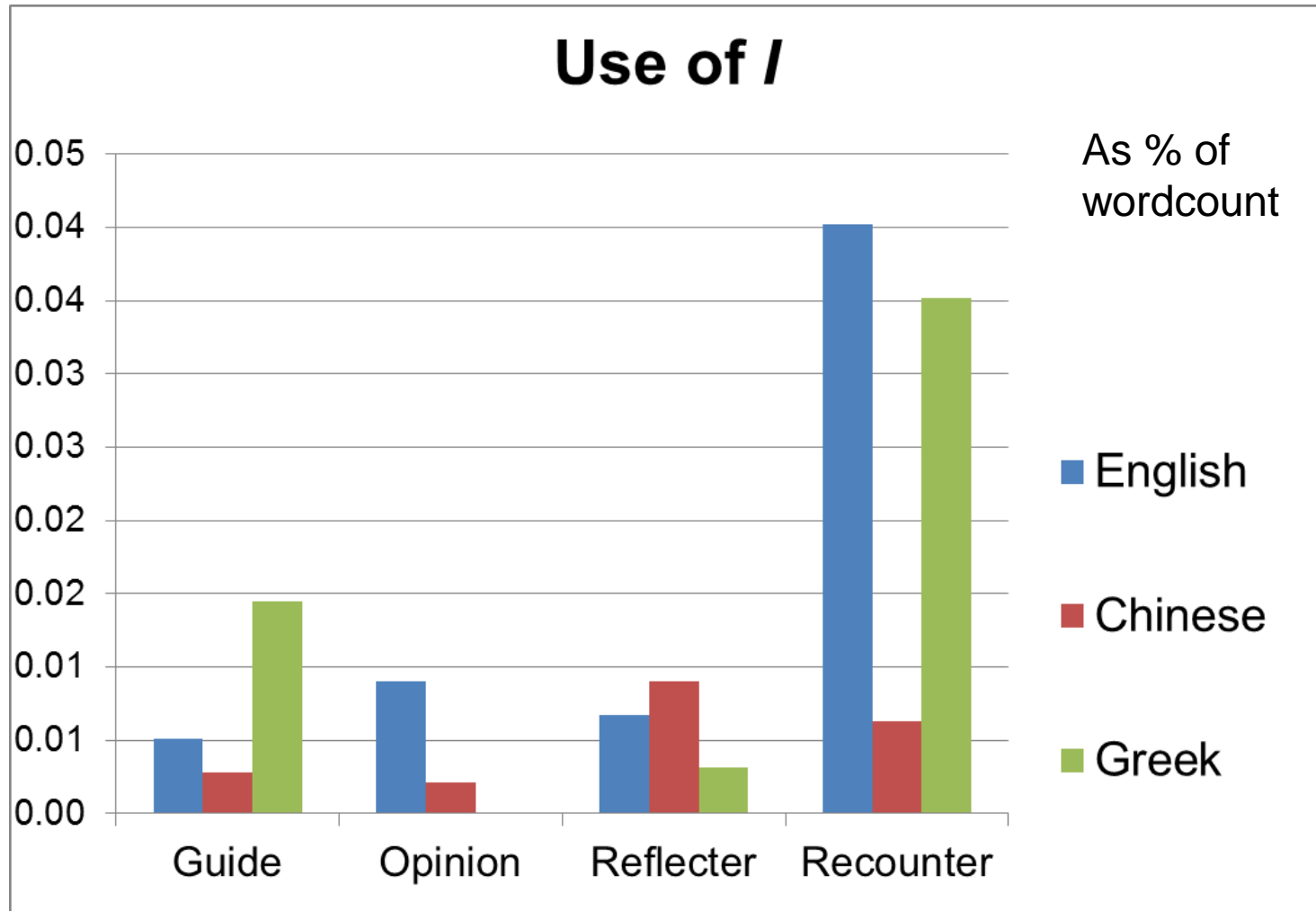


Functional categorization: *we*





Functional categorization: /





Common clusters: /



L1 English	Freq.	Example
I HAVE LEARNT	7	<i>Overall, I have learnt not just how to work with ...</i>
I WOULD HAVE	6	<i>In retrospect, I would have requested that all team...</i>
I FELT THAT	6	<i>I felt that I was not entirely treated with respect...</i>
I BELIEVE THAT	6	<i>I believe that CAD can be used to produce better...</i>

L1 Chinese	Freq.	Example
I HAVE LEARNT	3	<i>And I have learnt that the development process is...</i>
I WILL	2	<i>In this section, I will explain our groups' original ...</i>

L1 Greek	Freq.	Example
I CONFIRM THAT	10	<i>I confirm that I have not received help from...</i>
I HAVE NOT	10	<i>I confirm that I have not received help from...</i>
I WOULD LIKE	7	<i>I would like to take this opportunity to thank the ...</i>



Common clusters: we



L1 English	Freq.	Example
WE CAN SEE	17	<i>We can see that on average Benin City...</i>
WE NEED TO	10	<i>...of these fuels, we need to calculate three...</i>
WE CAN USE	7	<i>...so that we can use X-Ray Diffraction ...</i>

L1 Chinese	Freq.	Example
WE NEED TO	16	<i>What we need to do is put whatever evidence...</i>
WE CAN SEE	13	<i>We can see from the curve that at low SNRs...</i>
WE HAVE TO	11	<i>Then we have to load 500,000 GBP more ...</i>
WE KNOW THAT	11	<i>We know that ADC input range is from 0-5V...</i>

L1 Greek	Freq.	Example
WE CAN SEE	27	<i>We can see the results in the following figures...</i>
WE NEED TO	13	<i>We need to have high amplitude of the VIV ...</i>
WE OBSERVE THAT	11	<i>...we observe that there is a small reduction...</i>



Lecturers' views

Interviews with 10 Lecturers from Engineering



Clear, concise,
succinct writing



Verbosity

British students use
too many words.
Chinese students write
in a more minimal way.

- Passive usually recommended.
- We is acceptable.
- I is OK if one person writing.

Some Engineering students
have very poor written skills
– not just L2 English
students – and avoid
writing.



Conclusions



- All groups use *we* more than *I*
(but L1 Chi & L1 Grk more than L1 Eng.)
 - L1 Eng favours use of *I*.
-
- L1 Chi use *we* mainly in representative function.
 - L1 Grk use *we* mainly to recount procedures.
-
- L1 Eng use *I* mainly for recounting



Implications for tutors



- Use of 1st person pronouns does not detract from effectiveness of the writing.
- Recognise a broader rather than narrower view of acceptable language.
- L2 English students may find reflective writing particularly challenging.
- No need to avoid using 1st person pronouns.
- Recognise different cultural backgrounds and values brought to academic study.



Next steps



- Closer look at the Representative category.
- Follow-up on interviews with lecturers in Engineering.
- Follow-up on interviews with students about their writing.
- Increase size of L1 Chinese and L1 Greek corpora.
- Add other groups of students?



Thank you!



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